

Advisory Council on Food and Environmental Hygiene

**Minutes of the Forty-fifth Meeting
Held at 2:30 p.m. on Thursday, 25th May 2009
at Room 2005, 20/F, Murray Building, Garden Road, Central**

Mr. FONG Wo, Felix, JP	(Chairman)
Professor CHAN Kay-sheung, Paul	
Professor CHAN Yan-keung, Thomas	
Ms. CHEUK Fung-ting	
Dr. HO Pak-leung	
Mr. Allen HO	
Mr. LAU Yiu-fai, Ronald	
Dr. LEONG FUNG Ling-yee, Lilian, BBS, JP	
Ms. LI Hiu-lee, Winnie	
Dr. LO Chi-kin, JP	
Professor LO Yuk-lam	
Mrs. Elizabeth MOK	
Dr. YUE Kwok-to	
Mrs. Stella HUNG, JP	Permanent Secretary for Food and Health (Food)
Mr. CHEUK Wing-hing, JP	Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene
Dr. LEUNG Siu-fai	Deputy Director of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation
Dr. LEUNG Ting-hung, JP	Head, Surveillance and Epidemiology Branch, Department of Health

Absent with Apologies

Mr. LEE Chi-keung, Alan	
Professor WONG Po-choi, MH	
Professor WU Shiu-sun, Rudolf	
Ms. CHEUNG Siu-hing, JP	Director of Agricultural, Fisheries and Conservation

In Attendance

Food and Health Bureau

Prof Gabriel LEUNG	Under Secretary for Food & Health
Mrs. Angelina CHEUNG	Ag Deputy Secretary for Food and

Mr. Owin FUNG	Health Principal Assistant Secretary for Food and Health (Food) ³
Mr. Paul C Y CHAN	Political Assistant to Secretary for Food & Health
Mr. Edward CHAN	Assistant Secretary for Food and Health (Food) Special Duties 1

Food and Environmental Hygiene Department

Dr. Constance CHAN, JP	Controller, Centre for Food Safety
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Opening Remarks

1. The Chairman welcomed Members to the meeting. He expressed a vote of thanks to the ex-Chairman Professor YUEN Kwok-yung for his work and contribution to the ACFEH.
2. With a view to enhancing the knowledge of the work of the ACFEH by the public, the Chairman asked members' view on his suggestion about the issue of a press release on non-confidential matters of public concern after meetings of the ACFEH.
3. In response to a member's enquiry, the Chairman responded that there would be no hard and fast rule governing the timing and issue of the press release. After some deliberation, members generally agreed with the proposal.

Agenda Item 1 : Confirmation of the Minutes of the Last Meeting

4. Members confirmed the minutes of the last meeting without amendments.

Agenda Item 2 : Matters Arising from the Minutes of the Last Meeting

5. There were no matters arising from the minutes of last meeting.

Agenda Item 3 : Prevention and Control of Human Swine Influenza Infection in Hong Kong (ACFEH Paper 06/2009)

6. Professor Gabriel LEUNG introduced the paper and updated members about the current development and control of the infection, in particular going

through from the stage of late containment to the stage of early mitigation.

7. A member expressed his concern about the frequency of cleansing and disinfection conducted at public transport facilities, airport, hospitals, clinics, etc. He urged that the Government should gather and coordinate such information for timely announcement so that the public would be in the picture of the state of cleanliness of these facilities/premises and would build up confidence in the government's work in preventing and controlling the spread of the human swine influenza (HSI) in Hong Kong. Professor LEUNG said that there was a dedicated Government website containing the latest information on the development of HSI in Hong Kong and the measures being taken to protect public health. He added that sustained efforts on all fronts were paramount to contain the spread of the infection in the community.

8. A member asked about the symptoms peculiar to this new influenza and the reliability of the rapid test for the HSI. Professor LEUNG responded that the symptoms of HSI were very similar to that of normal influenza. He also mentioned that local airlines including Cathay Pacific and Dragonair were handing out declaration forms to passengers appealing to their cooperation for reporting influenza symptoms and advising them not to travel if they were sick. As regards the penalty on false declaration, Professor LEUNG said that under the provision of Chapter 599, it was an offence if a person failed to report a notifiable communicable disease to the Authority. That said, he concurred that legal action was not the best option to control the infection. It was the self awareness and cooperation of the passengers that counted. On the issue of the reliability of the rapid tests, Professor LEUNG reassured that the rapid tests were trustworthy with the reliability more than 90%. He supplemented that the reliability also depended on how to collect specimen from the infected patients. Despite the high reliability of the rapid tests, Professor LEUNG pointed out that it was not practical to perform a universal test on HSI for the whole population.

9. A member observed that the declaration form currently used by airlines was not specific enough to indicate correctly the symptoms of influenza. She also opined that no warning notice was available on the form to draw respondents' attention to the legal liability of false declaration. She suggested that the declaration form should be revised so as to capture the symptoms of influenza and set out clearly the legal consequence of false declaration. She also pointed out that it would be too late for an air passenger to declare whether he/she had been infected with influenza after he/she was already on the plane. Professor LEUNG replied that a new declaration form for HSI was in place for use by passengers upon their arrival at the Hong Kong International Airport. They were required to report any flu related symptoms.

It was also clearly set out on the declaration form that the provision of personal health information was obligatory under the law. He added that some airline companies were also preparing another form for passengers to fill out before they boarded the planes.

10. In response to the Chairman's suggestion to include some more explicit and stronger wording on the declaration form to advise people of the penalty due to missing or false declaration, Professor LEUNG said that the Government needed to strike a balance between self compliance, enforcement and penalty. He revealed that the Government had produced an API which could be utilized by airlines to show it on board. However, as he learned from some airline companies, they needed to wait until the next major maintenance programme in order to install it onto the planes' broadcast systems. Stella HUNG supplemented that it would be useful, in the meantime, for crew members to broadcast on the plane to arouse the attention of passengers of their obligation to declare their health condition.

11. A member agreed that there were some possible ways to detect passengers who had been infected with influenza on plane. However, he cautioned that it would be counter-productive if excessive pressure was put on the passengers as the latter might deliberately hide their illness so as to avoid the trouble to be incurred as a consequence of making genuine declaration.

12. A member said that she had the impression that the Mainland counterparts had a better preventive measure against HSI than Hong Kong authority, given the relatively fewer incidents compared with its huge population. She pointed out that in order to control the importation of overseas cases, the Mainland port health officers would get aboard on each flight and check the body temperature of each passenger before they were allowed to disembark from the plane. She urged that Hong Kong Government officials should share the experience with their Mainland counterparts to improve the present on-flight health declaration mechanism. In response to the member's observation and suggestion, Professor Gabriel LEUNG said the body temperature detectors presently deployed at the airport were already very effective in picking out incoming passengers with a fever. On the issue of communication with Mainland officials, he added that close liaison was maintained at all levels in order to exchange first-hand information on the latest development and spread of HSI. Given the highly infectious nature of HSI, he cautioned that local outbreak would be imminent. He further stressed that the Government work and measures were aimed to contain the importation and spread of HSI as far as possible. This would give Hong Kong a bit more time to prepare for a widespread situation of HSI in the community.

13. A member commented that a lot of effort had been made by the Government to contain the disease. However, in view of its relatively low infection and low mortality rate, the HSI should not be considered as a very formidable infectious disease. He opined that the Government should strike a better balance between the severity of HSI and the resources spent. Professor Gabriel LEUNG explained that HSI was different from ordinary influenza because there was no immunity in the local population. Professor LEUNG added that the Government would closely monitor the development of HSI and devise cost effective measures to tackle the problems. With the availability of more clinical data and information from overseas authorities, he reassured that the Government would resort to the most appropriate measures commensurate with the severity of HSI and its development globally.

14. In response to the Chairman's enquiry as to whether schools would be closed due to HSI outbreak, Professor Gabriel LEUNG said that if there was sign of a local outbreak, all primary schools and kindergartens would be closed for two weeks with a view to deterring widespread and chain infection in the community. He added that children were considered to be more vulnerable due to their lower level of alertness of personal hygiene. As regards the length of suspension, he said that the two-week duration was aimed to cover two incubation periods of HSI.

15. A member pointed out that as there would be many overseas students returning to Hong Kong in the next few weeks, the Government should put across a clear message to appeal to these students for postponing their trip back to Hong Kong if they were sick. As regards the control measures at high-risk areas including schools, shopping malls and public transport facilities, he urged that the Government should strengthen the publicity so as to raise the public's awareness of personal hygiene. Professor Gabriel LEUNG briefed the meeting that the Government had disseminated to overseas students through the Economic and Trade Offices and student unions of some overseas universities the message of not returning to Hong Kong if they had developed symptoms of influenza. On the effort of disinfecting public places including shopping malls and public transport facilities, Professor LEUNG revealed that the Government had already reached out to the "LINK" and the Housing Department to ask them to step up the cleansing and disinfection in their premises. The public bus companies had also been requested to enhance the cleansing and disinfection in their fleet of vehicles and related facilities.

16. The Chairman opined that the overall community awareness of the HSI was low as the general public considered that HSI was simply another type of influenza. He urged that the Government should step up publicity and education to raise public awareness. He invited DFEH to provide information on the work of environmental hygiene in the community. Mr.

CHEUK Wing-hing responded that FEHD had already printed and distributed 2.5 million leaflets to households to educate the public on the importance of personal, home and environmental hygiene. He added that FEHD had stepped up cleansing of streets, rear lanes, public toilets and public markets. In this regard, FEHD had identified 86 rear lanes and joined hands with the district councils and local communities to improve the hygiene condition of these locations. On the other hand, FEHD had issued about 48,000 letters to responsible persons of food premises and public market stalls to solicit their support to improve the hygiene condition of their premises. Mr. CHEUK added that all the efforts had to be sustained in order to bring about a significant and noticeable improvement. Mr. CHEUK also briefed the meeting that the Home Affairs Department had mobilized the area committees and some district volunteers to extend the efforts of cleaning up old tenement buildings. In response to a member's concern about improper working gears of frontline cleansing staff, Mr. CHEUK said that FEHD staff and contractors' staff were generally equipped with proper tools to perform their duties. He would look into the matter nonetheless.

17. In response to a member, Professor Gabriel LEUNG clarified that HSI was not air-borne in nature but was spread by way of droplets within a radius of one to two metres only. He stressed that the disinfection of door handles and other similar fixtures appeared to be fairly important to arrest the transmission of the disease. He further said that the Government would draw up the priority of vaccination of various social groups, taking into account expert advice.

18. The Chairman concluded that there had been much discussion about the topic of HSI. Members were generally briefed and updated about the current situation and the action taken by the Government.

Agenda Item 4 : Summary of Recent Food Incidents (ACFEH Paper 07/2009)

19. Dr. Constance CHAN introduced the paper.

20. On the issue of Salmonella contamination of US pistachio products, a member remarked that it was quite rare that low-moisture pistachio would be contaminated with Salmonella and he understood that the USFDA was still investigating the incident. Dr. Constance CHAN explained that the recall was actually a precautionary measure taken by the US manufacturer upon knowledge of the contaminated product, and local retail shops had also taken prompt action in parallel to remove remaining stock of concerned products from their shelves to safeguard public health.

21. A member asked whether the Government had studied any correlation between recent local Salmonella food poisoning cases associated with peanut butter and cases in the previous years in order to find out the reasons accounting for significant increase in the number of these cases. Dr. Constance CHAN pointed out that FEHD had kept a close eye on the development of the Salmonella food poisoning cases and had maintained close liaison with Department of Health (DH). So far, according to the notifications to DH and analysis by microbiologist, there was no indication that US contaminated peanut butter had given rise to local Salmonella food poisoning outbreaks. Dr. T H LEUNG supplemented that DH was also closely monitoring the cases and would take prompt action if abnormal situation was found.

22. A member appreciated the efforts made by CFS, in particular the issue of regular food safety reports to the public. She suggested that CFS should also issue some guidelines to the trade to help food traders to have better knowledge of ways to handle, process and manufacture foods and ultimately improve food safety. She quoted the recent report by CFS on aluminium in baking powder as an example. Dr. Constance CHAN explained that the recent report by CFS was a risk assessment study on aluminium in food to follow up the recommendations by the Joint Food and Agriculture Organization/World Health Organization Expert Committee on Food Additives (JECFA) which re-evaluated the safety of aluminium in food in 2006. Dr CHAN said that CFS had conducted workshops with the trade concerned to brief them on the content of the risk assessment report and discussed alternatives for use before the public announcement of the report. She reassured that with the collaboration between the government, the trade and the general public, the recognition of the importance of food safety would be further enhanced.

23. In response to a member, Dr. Constance CHAN said that there had already been a close liaison between Hong Kong and the Mainland on the issue of food safety. She added that there were overseas as well as Mainland experts on the Expert Committee on Food Safety established under the CFS. She pointed out that the recent report on aluminium in food had been submitted to the Expert Committee on Food Safety for discussion and sent to the Mainland's General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine for reference.

24. A member expressed her concern over the export of food from the Mainland via improper channels and requested the Government to look into the issue. Dr. Constance CHAN pointed out that CFS took an average of more than 65 000 food samples at import, wholesale and retail levels for testing on a yearly basis and more than 99 % of these food samples yielded

satisfactory results. Notwithstanding such high level of satisfaction, she reassured members that CFS would continue to closely monitor the quality of food at all levels.

Agenda Item 6 : Any Other Business

25. There being no further business, the meeting adjourned at 4:30 p.m. The Secretariat would inform members of the date of the next meeting in due course.

**Secretariat
Advisory Council on Food and Environmental Hygiene
Food and Health Bureau
July 2009**